

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Lochaber Committee** held **REMOTELY** via **MS Teams** on **Monday, 29 June, 2020 at 2.00 p.m.**

Present:

Mr A Baxter
Mr A Henderson
Mr N McLean

Mr I Ramon
Mr D Rixson
Mr B Thompson

In attendance:

Mr P Senior, Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning
Mrs C McDiarmid, Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Mrs D Ferguson, Senior Ward Manager (Ross, Skye and Lochaber)
Ms T Urry Head of Roads & Transport
Mr R Gerring, Transport Planning Manager
Mr M Bain, Project Manager, Corran Ferry, Community Services
Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager
Ms A Clark, Head of Policy and Reform
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant, Chief Executive's Service

Also in attendance:-

Chief Inspector I Graham, Police Scotland
Inspector I Campbell, Lochaber Area Inspector, Police Scotland
Ms F McKee, Voluntary Action Lochaber
Mr A Nicolson, Area Manager, Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Mr F Coupland, CEO of the Lochaber Chamber of Commerce

An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council. All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to the Committee.

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

There were no apologies for absence.

**2. Declarations of Interest
Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

The Committee **NOTED** the following Declarations of Interest:-

Item 5 iii - Mr A Henderson (financial)
Item 6 – Mr A Henderson (non financial)

3. Police Scotland Report Aithisg Poileas Alba

The Chief Inspector and Inspector for Lochaber Area Police provided a verbal report on the Covid-19 response and other operational matters. Given the current restrictions relating to Covid the Police were proactively managing this by way of enforcement, explanation and encouragement. The Police were still carrying out enforcement activity in the area and were still handing out enforcement penalties. The Police worked closely with the Council in terms of business premises or with persons who wished to set up a business premises and how they manage it. The Police were also following the phased re-opening in accordance with Scottish Government guidelines. There were still Police patrols in the area and they were receiving a significant number of calls in relation to concerns about people travelling to the area and these calls were acted upon mainly through explanation and encouragement of the travel restrictions currently in place due to Covid. Also, there were no racially aggravated incidents reported in Lochaber during the period of lockdown.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- It was queried if there had been any instances of people arriving in Lochaber from overseas and not observing the current 14 day quarantine period and what was the Police approach to enforcing this. It was advised that there had been some overseas visitors in the area, but not individuals having to go through quarantine in Lochaber and the Police had not been asked to carry out any checks by the Border Force as yet.
- It was queried if calls to 101 had declined and if this meant Police response times were improving. Further, there had been considerable local feedback about the length of time to get a response to 101 calls and it was appreciated that the Police were in an impossible position, but if extra resources could be devoted to this, this would be useful in order to restore confidence in the Police. It was explained that call volumes had remained static over the crises and routine calls relating to crime had dropped. Recently, routine calls relating to crimes/missing persons had returned to routine business. Concerns relating to 101 calls response times were acknowledged and would be fed back to the Police Command team to address.
- Recognition was given to the work of the local Police Force in Mallaig during the crises. This area had come under considerable pressure from people visiting the area and Police Officers faced the difficult if not impossible task of explaining, encouraging people to move on and taking enforcement action against individuals.
- There was local concern regarding the increasing prevalence of drugs and supply of drugs in the community. It was advised that there had been an increase in seizures of drugs in the area and the local Police were in a better position to proactively patrol the area as there were not the same demands on their time during the crises. The type of drugs available and prices changed regularly. There were intelligence reports of drugs being in the community which were acted upon and reference was made to a recent drugs enforcement operation carried out in the area.
- It was queried what measures could be taken to help deter irresponsible wild camping. It was advised that the local Police were carrying out regular patrols, particularly in the Glen Etive and Mallaig areas. If there were areas of significant problems then the Police would take part in a joint initiative with the Council to discourage wild camping, anti social behaviour and littering.
- Once lockdown restrictions are relaxed there may be an increasing prevalence in the area of wild camping. This was difficult to predict and people would not

come to the area if the weather was poor. The number of people coming to the area would also be dependent on the easing of travel restrictions for going abroad, Calmac ferries and whether official campsites would be opened. Therefore putting advance plans in place to meet people before they set up camp was difficult, but the Police would work with the Council and local landowners on this issue.

The Committee **NOTED** the Police Scotland update on the Covid-19 response and other operational matters and extended their thanks to the local Police Force in Lochaber for their efforts in recent months in challenging circumstances and the good community policing was much appreciated.

4. Return to School Update Fios às Ùr mu Thilleadh dhan Sgoil

The Executive Chief Officer (ECO), Education and Learning provided a verbal report on the reopening of schools in August.

The ECO explained that the Council along with partner agencies and schools would need to react and adjust plans in response to the Covid-19 requirement now, but also the expectation that schools in August would be fully open. There were a number of options that schools would be asked to work towards, with the 1st option being a 100% return to school with no social distancing measures. The 2nd option was a 100% return with 1m social distancing measures and the 3rd option the 50% criteria, maintaining social distancing at 2m and a blended model of learning.

The ECO had commissioned a programme to ensure the whole organisation involved in preparing schools was as ready as possible for August. This included 11 Sub Groups covering areas such as catering, transport and IT and the need for risk assessments and minimising the potential for risk. Following Scottish Government guidance last week, planning was now being made for option 1, a 100% return to schools.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Reference was made to pupils from the Small Isles and Knoydart currently staying in Mallaig High School hostel during the school week. It was understood that the hostel was to be closed at the beginning of the new term. One of the dangers was that if one child contacted Covid while in the hostel, then all the other pupils would have to also be isolated for 14 days. This scenario was a concern particularly for those parents whose child was in transition from P.7 to secondary school. Calmac were also on a reduced timetable this summer, which would affect the frequency of pupils returning home. It was explained that working with the local area planning committee and local area project group and Transport Officers the Service would look to identify bespoke solutions for this particular scenario. There were 203 schools in Highland and each school required a contingency plan in the event of a worst case scenario. An assurance was given that this scenario was on the list for consideration as part of the local plan for that area. It was requested that information on this issue would be circulated to all Members of the Committee and to include the School hostel at Ardnamurchan High School in Strontian.
- It was queried if the option of full home school learning should also be considered. Also, if options 2 or 3 were to be adopted, an assurance was sought that Lochaber Schools would have at least 50% available attendance. It was advised that Schools had already been working towards a scenario of

blended learning, so if there was a need to revert to worst case scenario, schools would be ready for blended learning. Further, the ambition was that all schools reach the 50% available attendance and a bridging the gap assessment had been undertaken in the process of meeting this ambition.

- There seemed to be a high number of vacancies for Maths Teachers across Highland and given that there may be a requirement for even more Teachers depending on which school reopening option was used, it was queried how these vacancies would be filled. It was advised the HR team were leading on recruitment and there would be an assessment at the end of this week in terms of recruitment activity, how successful this had been and where the gaps were. Thereafter, there would be a plan of action to remedy the vacancies.
- Recognition was given to the work of Teachers over the last few months in the difficult circumstances of teaching pupils from home and Teachers would be vital for the recovery of our schools in the new term. However, a view was expressed that there was a lot of uncertainty and disarray in schools and this was leading to morale issues and teacher and parent concerns and in this respect, examples were given. In response, it was explained that there was an extensive comprehensive programme of communication and consultation that takes place with all schools, which allowed for concerns to be raised and addressed. Any specific concerns that Members were aware of should be shared with the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning who would ensure that local Area Managers would follow up with Head Teachers.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED:-**

i the update on return to School; and

ii that the local area return to school arrangements for pupils from Knoydart and Small Isles staying in Mallaig High School hostel and pupils staying in the School hostel at Ardnamurchan High School would be sent to the Local Committee Members.

5. Covid-19 Response Freagairt Covid-19

i The Highland Council Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

The Senior Ward Manager gave a presentation on the Highland Council response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The presentation covered the setting up of humanitarian assistance centres to support key groups in the community who would be vulnerable to Covid; the setting up of a Covid Helpline, Community Hubs; a distribution and virtual Hub. The types of support offered included providing support for food to shielding groups, Pharmacy deliveries, advice and guidance. Specific local arrangements and support for the Lochaber area were also highlighted. Arising from the Council's response to Covid, key lessons learned and opportunities were detailed. There would be a review of all Covid projects by the Council at the end of July.

The Council had also worked with communities and there had been an impressive Community response to the crises through volunteering. Just over £2.2m had been distributed to community groups in Highland.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee thanked the Senior Ward Manager for her tremendous leadership and effort in responding to the Covid crises, along with appreciation to staff for their work, much of which had gone on unnoticed, but was crucial for members of the community in Lochaber.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation on the Highland Council Covid Community response.

ii Third Sector An Treas Roinn

Ms F McKee, Voluntary Action Lochaber was in attendance and gave a verbal report on the community response to Covid in Lochaber and the services that had been provided. Overall there had been a tremendous community response with up to 250 volunteers coming forward to help deliver a wide range of services from providing food to those that were shielding, to dog walking. There were many examples of families, friends and neighbours helping each other out. There had been positive partnership working and good will in the community and financial support had made this possible. While the number of Covid cases and infections had reduced it was important to keep in place the finance and structures in case there was another outbreak.

A point was made that Lochaber featured very well in terms of the amount of volunteer effort and compared favourably with the rest of Highland. Also, it was good to see the willingness of Community Councils to work together. Although we may have passed the worst of the Covid outbreak in health terms, the long term economic consequences were very concerning. A large part of the tourist season had been lost and for Lochaber, an area that was very dependent on tourism this was concerning, and it was felt there would be considerable financial hardship for some families.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee thanked Ms F McKee and her colleagues in the Third Sector for the community response to Covid, particularly in providing services to fill gaps in service provision in communities. The Lochaber community had shown great resilience in facing up to the challenges faced by Covid.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation from Voluntary Action Lochaber on the Third Sector Covid response.

iii Private Sector An Roinn Phrìobhaideach

Declaration of Interest - Mr A Henderson declared a financial interest in this item as his spouse had a Bed and Breakfast business and therefore he took no part in the discussion for this item.

Mr A McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager, The Highland Council, Mr A Nicolson, Area Manager, Highlands & Islands Enterprise and Mr F Coupland, CEO of Lochaber Chamber of Commerce were in attendance to provide reports in relation to the Private Sector response to Covid-19.

Business Grants

It was advised that the grant schemes were initiated at the end of March and within a few days the scheme was extended to in theory around 10,000 businesses in Highland being eligible to apply for £94m in grants. This showed the fast pace of change and scale of the problem that Council Officers had to deal with at a time when lockdown was commencing. The teams put in place to deal with the grant scheme were highlighted and amounted to around 40 Officers being involved in the administration of the scheme. Across Highland there had been a total of 6,363 business grants awarded to date across the different grant streams, totalling £65,872,000. The evolving nature

of the scheme had meant significant challenges and the cross Service team dealing with the scheme had done a tremendous job in administering it. Businesses were still being encouraged to see if they were eligible to apply to the scheme through Press Releases and Business Groups.

Business Gateway Highland

The Business Gateway service in Highland during Covid-19 had to adapt its delivery model. Businesses were under immense stress, the self-employed facing significant hardship and a number of other associated issues.

The service in the last year had already moved a number of its support services online. Given that the businesses were working differently and we were offering a number of digital products it made sense to respond to their needs and allow a flexible engagement model. With the restrictions that Covid-19 brought, the digital model allowed the service to scale up its online offering, including core workshops, webinars, tutorials and digital surgeries.

In the Lochaber area the service directly supported 39 businesses, another 46 were channelled through the Business Gateway Highland website to book on workshops, digital surgeries, webinars etc.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- It was explained that people's personal circumstances were different which may affect their eligibility for business grants, but one particular problem area was self catering businesses that had started within the last 12 months. It was very difficult for them to demonstrate the bookings and income criteria set by the Scottish Government. Also, those who had recently started self employment had found it difficult to provide the relevant information set out in the criteria.
- It was queried what economic support the Council was aiming to give businesses in Lochaber in the period of recovery. Also, the Government had said that the money coming to the Council from the Crown Estate can also be used to provide grants for businesses that had fallen through the gaps from previous grant support. It was queried how this support could assist coastal communities. It was explained that there would be a multi faceted approach to recovery and keeping people in employment and helping people develop new skills to compete for employment was key. The money from the Crown Estate could be considered as one option to help businesses in recovery activities.

Thereafter, the Committee commended the work done by the Corporate teams involved in dispersing business grants.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise

The economy had suffered an unprecedented shock due to Covid-19 and in Highland it had been disproportionately badly hit in the sectors affected by the lockdown i.e. hospitality and tourism. The furlough scheme had been essential in saving businesses and jobs. Tourism was beginning to commence again, but the area was unlikely to see the volumes of people coming to the area as would normally be expected. Businesses had made great progress in adapting to the new health and safety and social distancing requirements. Unfortunately, unemployment had risen and the public sector would need to respond to this issue and support young people in particular, whose options for employment would be considerably limited this year.

The Highland Council and HIE would be holding the first Highland Economic Recovery Partnership meeting next week to ensure there was a co-ordinated strategic response to the aftermath of the public and economic emergency. Financial support from resilience and hardship funds had also been provided to communities in the Lochaber area. Also, HIE's Business Panel Survey was underway and would give a clear picture of the state of the economy in Highland.

In discussion, it was highlighted that one of areas of concern from the public was that we should not go back to the way things were before Covid and that the recovery should be greener. It was queried if HIE had ideas about how this aspiration could be achieved in Highland. In response, there were a number of ways to achieve this such as helping businesses adapt to a new way of working e.g. remote working, online meetings. Also, in terms of capital investment, HIE had been working with the Council to align capital funding plans, in order that the necessary infrastructure was in place to meet our net zero carbon emission aspirations.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee thank HIE for the proactive work they undertook, in approaching community organisations regarding financial assistance.

Lochaber Chamber of Commerce

It was highlighted that collaboration and communication was essential in terms of the assistance from the Council to assist businesses with the economic recovery in Lochaber. The Lochaber Chamber of Commerce had tried to support businesses during the past few months in terms of what financial assistance was available and what they should be applying for and the communication and collaboration with the Council and HIE had been excellent during this process. There was a need to continue the communication with businesses for reassurance purposes as the business community tried to reopen.

In the recovery phase, the Chamber was planning ahead in relation to what its marketing plan for the area should be and working with businesses and the community on this. A business survey had been undertaken and an analysis of future bookings was being undertaken.

There was a concern that there would be a sudden significant increase in the number of people wishing to visit the area, which while welcomed, smaller accommodation providers might not be fully opened. In this respect it was queried if there was a capacity issue in terms of accommodation for tourists. It was confirmed that capacity issues were a concern for the business community and there was uncertainty about when various establishments could reopen.

One way to help the High Street would be a relaxation in licensing laws to allow pavement cafes and outdoor drinking and it was queried if this should be looked at for Lochaber. It was advised that there were discussions locally regarding the High Street and how businesses could be operated differently going forward. It was also pleased to see that the Council planned to support businesses and review licensing.

The Chairman thanked the CEO Lochaber Chamber of Commerce for attending the meeting and it was noted that the CEO had a meeting scheduled with the Leader of the Council in July.

The Committee **NOTED** the presentation on the Private Sector Covid response from Highland Council; HIE and Lochaber Chamber of Commerce.

At this point the meeting was adjourned for a short comfort break and it resumed again at 4.15p.m.

6. Corran Narrows Update Fios às Ùr mu Aiseag a' Chorrain

Declaration of Interest - Mr A Henderson declared a non-financial interest in this item as the Chair of HITRANS but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude his involvement in discussion.

There was circulated Report No LA/11/20 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment which provided an operational update on the Corran Ferry. In addition, there was an update on the Corran Ferry Project (Outline Business Case) and the work being progressed regarding the future prospects of a Fixed Link Crossing.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- The Council had committed to a carbon neutral Highlands and it was queried what the options were for a clean energy solution for a replacement ferry. It was advised that Officers had met with Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd at their HQ, Port Glasgow regarding the Vessel and Infrastructure option and discussed using a modern hybrid vessel that could provide a 30% reduction in fuel consumption. However, there was evidence that some hybrid vessels had faced many technical issues. There may also be higher capital costs with a hybrid vessel. Reliability in a vessel was key and the current vessel provided a very high standard of reliability. In this respect, Orkney Islands Council were at the forefront of bringing hybrid vessels to Scotland and lessons would be learned from their experience.
- In relation to post Covid and opportunities for investment in terms of active travel, the role of a Fixed Link connection to provide a walking and cycling option for Corran Narrows has been recognised in the Fixed Link study.
- In moving forward looking at Fixed Link options, the importance was stressed of the need to consult with the community and establish their opinion on this option.
- Transport Scotland Officers working on the Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 had shifted their focus to the Covid pandemic and were now working on the Transport transition plan. It was highlighted that there was an opportunity to lobby for investment and growth in the Scottish economy, particularly in Lochaber.
- In relation to the new ticketing system, it was explained that a business case had to be produced for new ICT investment and work on this was being undertaken. The business case would be considered by the ICT Board in August and if approved, money for it would require to be secured from within the Corran Ferry budget. This was a necessary investment for the operational efficiency of the vessel and the health, safety and wellbeing of the crew.

The Committee extended their thanks to Officers for their work on this project for the way it had been structured and the community involvement.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the report and generally supported the proposals in the following report – Corran Narrows Update Report on i Corran Ferry Project (Outline Business Case) and ii Fixed Link Crossing.

7. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** the Minutes of Meeting of the Lochaber Committee held on 19 February, 2020 which were approved by the Council on 12 March, 2020.

The meeting ended at 4.40 p.m.